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Passages

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PASSAGES

by

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I tend to base my art on an emotion I have had, am having or might hope to have. I usually reflect upon the many experiences that make me what I am. It is very important to know what I am, so important that I want to express parts of me. There is the "baggage" that I carry with me, this is all my life happenings. I do not care to simply open the suitcase and let people rummage through it, I prefer to reveal bits and pieces, hoping to create a dialogue between myself and the viewer. I hope that the viewer takes interest in who I am and has questions for me. Each individual experiences a plethora of activity and as social beings we want to share our experiences. The past gives us a reality, a "check and balance" of how to continue making sense out of our experiences. Since my work is continuously changing, I see it as a true expression of my own life.

I use the history of art as a resource. Some of my own thoughts and feelings may have been captured by another artist in another time. Sometimes I am anxious to see how others have expressed something that concerns me, that I care to express, yet at other times I am fearful of their view. The curiosity is what helps me to continue. Seeing someone else's work is another "check and balance" which acts to initiate deeper thought into my need to be expressive. Someone else's work can provide a departure point or it can dissuade me totally.

Neither the history of art nor the personal past can be completely isolated from one another. As an artist, one is committed to understanding as much about a subject as is possible. This requires personal reflection and historical reference. It is not enough to rely on only one point of view because art should be truthful and meaningful. In history we can find truth, in ourselves we can find meaning.

Essay on "The Past". May, 1991

I wish to thank the many people who have supported me and given me the confidence to pursue my dreams. I especially thank Mom and Dad, David Jr. and Clare, Nanny and Cy, Gam and Gamps and Suzanne who have given me all the love in the world. Whitey Morange, William Keyser, Richard Tannen, Wendell Castle and Richard Hirsch who have inspired, encouraged and instructed me and their sincere guidance has been a true privilege. I also wish to thank my friends, family members and educators who are responsible for making up the wonderful contents of my "baggage".

PREFACE

I have been exploring the idea of passage. Passage can mean many things. There is physical passage: a place, a structure, a passageway. There is also the passage of time, of change, of growth and of decay. This work represents a rite of passage: a celebration, a ceremony, a ritual as well as a journey.

As I work, I think about wood as a natural resource, as a commercial product and as a living system. Process is crucial. The type of wood I use is very important. Choosing freshly harvested trees, kiln dried lumber or fallen, decayed parts is a large part of my decision making process. I try to find an appropriateness for the material, constantly evaluating the balance between message and meaning.

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The Work

A Passage for Light

It is most appropriate to discuss the work in chronological order. I exhibited three sculptures in the show. The first sculpture was made during the fall quarter. A Passage for Light developed after a thesis committee meeting in which it was suggested I do not limit my investigation of gates, arches and passages to a prescribed function. A Passage for Light attempted to address this issue specifically. During the same time, I was constructing another sculpture, Arch, which used the arch only in form and did not function to permit human interaction. I can not emphasize enough the importance of these two sculptures on the direction of my thesis work.

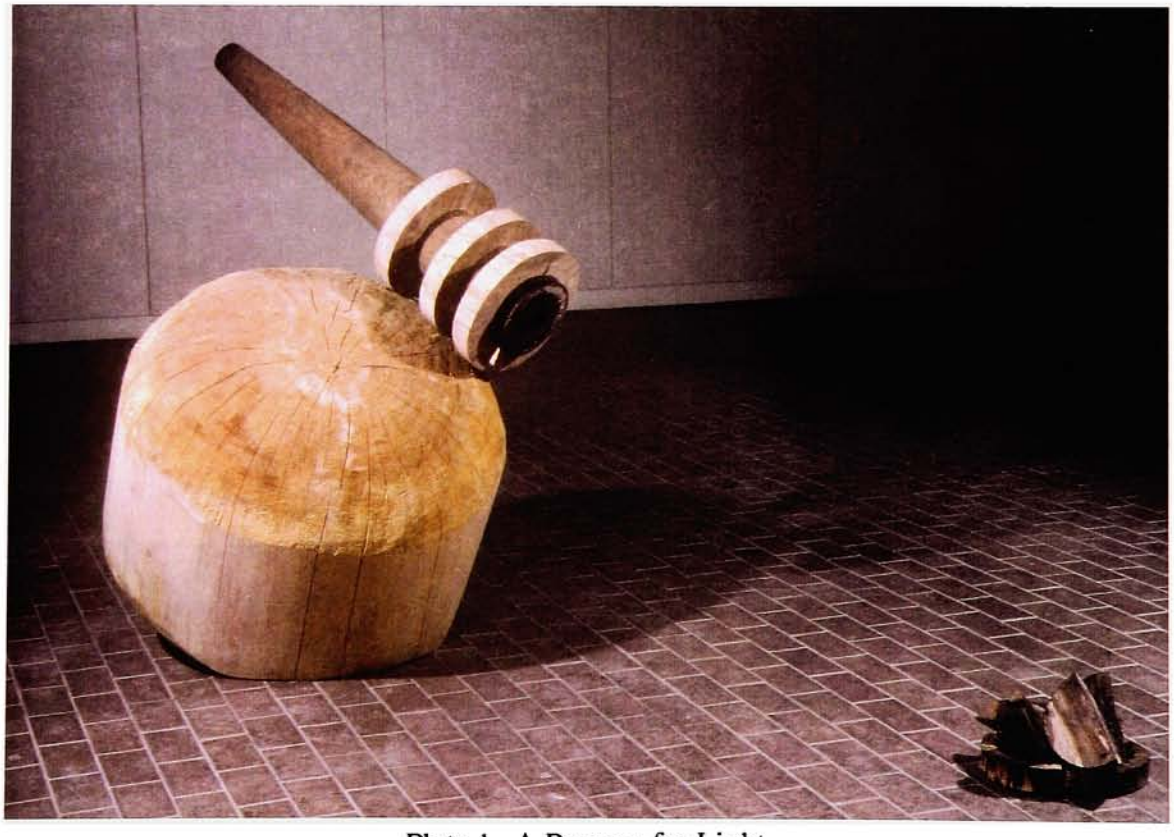

Plate 1. A Passage for Light

A Passage for Light was constructed in four parts (see plate 1). The large ball like form was carved from a solid piece of cottonwood using a chain saw, a wood carving blade attachment for a right angle grinder, gouges and a portable power planer. The large cone was turned on a lathe out of a section of a green walnut log after I drilled a 44" long hole through the center. This I achieved by welding an auger bit onto the end of a steel rod and mounting the bit in a 1/2" portable electric drill. By using the hole as a center line, I mounted the roughed blank between centers of a lathe. In order to enlarge the diameter of the hole through the cone after it was turned, I forged a ball on the end of a steel rod and reamed the red hot rod through the preexisting hole. The entire burning operation took 5 hours and proved very effective .

The three rings around the cone were introduced in order to visually add more weight to the cone. They were not part of the original plans but I was eager to resolve the problem of one object clearly too large for the other in such a tight composition. The rings were radial slices from an oak log. The slices were simply cut from the log. In order to mount the rings on the cone I calculated the diameter of the the cone at the point of contact and established the degree of taper. On a jig I set up on the Bridgeport milling machine, I cut the slices into true circles as well as cut the inside taper and diameter to form the ring. Mounting the cone and rings onto the ball proved to be the most difficult problem. This project was my first attempt at pinning two pieces of green wood together. Since one piece was comprised mainly of short grain, it presented a real challenge. The result was rather sloppy. Later, for A Passage of the Burning, I developed a much better system for pinning.

The final component for this sculpture consisted of a solid walnut ball, approximately 10" in diameter, split apart and placed within a narrow ring. The ball was turned green early in the quarter, kept inside to promote checking and later split and burned. This component came from the narrative that began to take place throughout the making of the piece. I thought it was very important that the hole through the cone focus on something. The entire sculpture reminds me of a magnifying glass. Whatever source of light was able to burn a hole through the cone also focused on the object on the ground and burned that as well.

Plate 2. A Passage of the Burning

A Passage of the Burning

I began work on A Passage of the Burning (see plate 2) sometime in the middle of the fall quarter. I had the good fortune to work with a local sawmill and cut a 300 year old walnut tree that was given to me. Soon after sawing the log I began thinking how I could use the big equipment to my advantage. I wanted to use big timbers. I had employed the use of stairs many times in my earlier work and felt the notion of stairs could enhance the idea of passage on many different levels. Unlike any other sculpture I had made before, both the image and the concept came to me immediately. Continuing on the idea of not allowing actual use, I envisioned a small ball at the top of the stairs and a groove running down instead of treads. Once I had the sketch on paper I began to make a model. Just after completing the model, in which I chose a burned finish, I heard news that the local sawmill had burned to the ground.

From another sawmill, I purchased two 8"x12" oak timbers which I cut into lengths of 6',5',4',3',2' and 1' long. These pieces formed the staircase. I also purchased two 6"x12" Oak timbers that formed the arch. The arch consisted of two vertical posts with integral tenons measuring 8'6" to the shoulders. The lintel measured 3'6" with mortises cut to accept the tenons. Since the posts were anchored to the staircase unit via mechanical fasteners and for the purpose of transportation I chose not to pin the joints of the lintel. The six stair pieces were positioned by a pinning system I developed that would allow for expansion and contraction as well as the build up of rust on the metal pins. I fabricated a drilling jig with two pinning points that would allow me to put as many holes in the timbers as needed to keep each unit in place. The size of the drilled hole would accept commercial steel pipe with a 3/4" o.d. and a 5/8" i.d. The entire jig functioned the same as a doweling jig only I could produce matching holes on the face of timbers that would be stacked in place as opposed to on the edges. I used commercially available 5/8" threaded rod in place of wooden dowels. I previously calculated the exact position the pins would go so as to not interfere with the carving of the groove.

In order to attach the vertical posts to the horizontal staircase unit I purchased 11/2"

threaded rod in 3' sections with washers and nuts. I made a drilling jig that would accept a 2" forstner style plumbers bit with an 18" extension. When mounted, the jig would allow me to accurately drill through the 12" timber and into the next timber to insure proper alignment without guess work or need to measure. I successively drilled through each of the four timbers which allowed me to run the threaded rod through the two uprights at the second and fifth tread timbers. Since the washer and nut were to be recessed, I used a template and router to make a 2 1/2" deep by 4 1/2" diameter recess on each of the outside timbers.

The ball that is mounted on the top tread was turned from a solid piece of green oak and mounted with the same metal pin system used to position the stairs. The groove was carved using a chain saw and the carving blade attachment for a right angle grinder. After all the construction and assembly was complete I used a propane torch to burn the form.

Plate 3. Detail: Four Passages
"Hollow Log"

Four Passages

Four passages was a sculpture that developed over a period of two months. At some point earlier in the year I helped a fellow Graduate student find rotten logs for a project he was working on in Glass. In our travels through the woods we came across a large Cottonwood tree about three feet in diameter and 10 feet long, completely hollow throughout its length (see plate 3). Soon after seeing the log I made arrangements to bring it to school. The log sat outside the wood shop for quite sometime. I enjoyed many qualities of the log, its scale, texture, and its ability to act as a passage on so many different levels. I saw children play on the log and crawl through it. I thought most about how nature fashioned the log without human intervention. I decided the log would be one component in a sculpture in which all the other components would pay homage to the rotten hollow log.

I began sketching various "tubes", each one fabricated differently. I sketched tubes made from solid wood planks to others made from cardboard and other such wood-by products. I knew from the beginning that the scale of each object had to be similar in size to the log. I became very concerned with the relationship between the fabricated tubes and natural log. The notion of raw material and the passage into commercial by-products became my focus.

I started fabricating a large cylinder that would eventually become one piece in the series but would first act as a jig for which I could make a laminated spiral 3' in diameter and 10' long. The cylinder consisted of six 3' diameter plywood discs equally distributed over a 10' length with notches cut around the diameter every 1 1/2" that would accept 1 1/2" x 1 1/2" x 10' battens. The center of each disc was drilled to accept a 2" steel pipe so that the entire fixture could be rotated on its center axis. Each pine strip was pre-drilled and screwed to the plywood discs. The jig complete, I began developing a clamping system that would enable me to get even pressure throughout the 60' of running length of the laminate.

Plate 4. Detail: Four Passages
"Spiral"

From the beginning I thought the laminate should be wide stock but rather thin, almost shell like. I chose 12" wide 1/10" thick hickory veneer. I calculated 4 plys would give me enough strength and enough visual mass for the shell. I calculated the total length of each ply was approximately 60' in order to achieve a helix 3' in diameter and ten feet long with enough loops to have a sense of closure. Before purchasing the veneer I laid 12" wide strips of 1/8" Masonite over the form to help make my decisions. Once I finalized the calculations I purchased the veneer and began testing clamping methods.

After investigating various options I decided the most appropriate way for me to glue up four layers, each layer sixty feet long, was to glue up the entire piece in one attempt. I thought a piece by piece, section by section method would be too monotonous and not as

exciting as an all or nothing approach. I chose to laminate the spiral using plywood cauls 3/8" thick cut to 2 1/2" x 16" strips. When placed across the lamination skewed off the axis of the cylinder, even clamping pressure could be achieved by screwing the ends of each strip to the battens. I put the cauls as close together as possible. In order to achieve a 60' long lamination, I butt jointed short sections end to end and reinforced the joint with duck canvas. The butt joints were staggered on each layer to prevent any weak spots. In order to keep the entire bundle of veneer in alignment, I built collars the exact dimension of the width of the veneer.

The 1/10" hickory veneer was somewhat brittle as well as very bubbly. In order to make each piece of veneer uniform in width I first had to flatten the veneer. I soaked the veneer with a mixture of glycerin and water and placed the stack between cauls with newspaper between each layer. For two weeks I changed the paper every two days. I trued one edge of the 10' long sections by grouping the sheets in groups of 5 and clamping between two straight edged boards. I hand planed the one edge true for each group and table sawed the other edge parallel. In order to make matching butt joints I made a crosscutting jig for the table saw that would enable me to overlap two ends of veneer and push them across the blade. I laid out each piece, calculated the length of each starting piece so that the joints would be staggered on each layer.

West System epoxy is a two part exothermic resin and catalyst that has specific cure rates depending on the temperature and humidity in the work environment. At very cold temperatures the epoxy mixture remains uncured. Since I was working on this project in the winter time I chose to glue up outside. The glue-up team consisted of approximately 12 people. I mixed about 1 1/4 gallons of epoxy with 1 can of colloidal silica made by West System. The silica acts as a thickening agent and I used it to ensure I would not starve the joints due to excessive clamping pressure and uneven glue spreading, as well as provide better gap filling properties. Once I mixed the epoxy I distributed smaller amounts to individuals who began spreading the resin on the layers of veneer. Once each surface was covered with epoxy I made a sandwich of two layers of Masonite on the bottom and two layers on the top with the four layers of veneer in the middle. I placed the sandwich in the restraints and proceeded to sight down the line of the bundle to make sure it was in line

with the jig to allow for proper placement. With the help of several assistants I began to screw the cauls across the veneer onto the form. Four hours later I had the entire unit clamped up and brought back inside the wood shop where the epoxy was beginning to warm up.

After 24 hours I removed the cauls and began to clean up the spiral and prepare for a finish. I worked the entire exterior of the spiral while it was still on the form. I made a simple jig for my circular saw that allowed me to trim the edges of the spiral to a line I marked. The layers did shift somewhat during the glue-up so the final width was reduced to nine inches, which functioned well. After applying three coats of epoxy and two coats of poly- urethane to the spiral I removed the form and began the same process on the interior and on the edges (see plate 4).

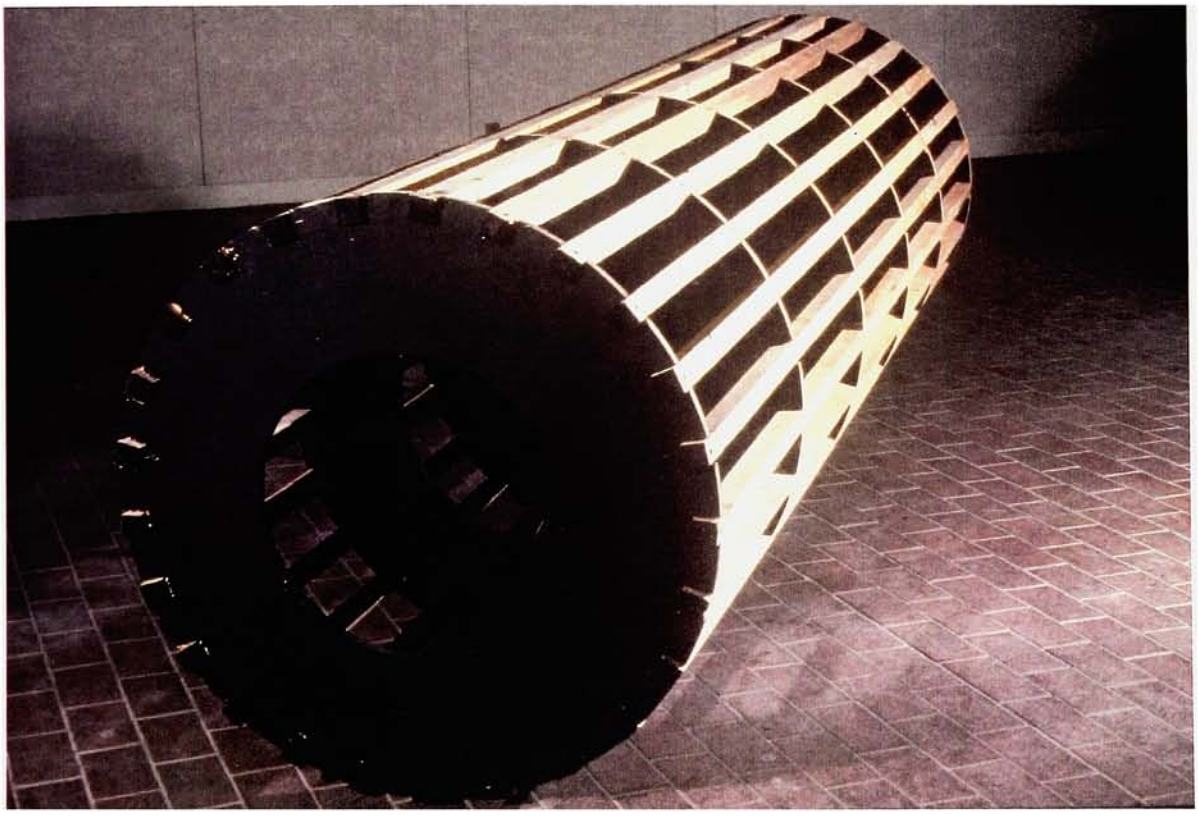

Plate 5. Detail: Four Passages
"Jig"

Once I removed the spiral from the jig, I began to deal with the jig as a sculptural element in the series. I scraped all the glue and removed all marks from the surfaces of the form. I then painted the inside surface of each of the 11/2" x 11/2" slats with black paint. Once completed, I cut larger holes in each of the plywood discs, starting with a 16" diameter hole on one end and progressively increasing to 28"diameter hole on the other end.. To complete the piece I painted one face of each of the plywood discs so that from one view the entire inside surface appeared painted black and from the other end view only the black lines were seen on the inside (see plate 5).

Plate 6. Detail: Four Passages
"Quartered Log"

After completing the spiral I felt I had the two ends of the continuum realized. The form fit in somewhere very close to the spiral and what needed to be realized was a piece to follow nature's hollow log. The final form I made for Four Passages consisted of a log 10' long about 2 1/2' in diameter that I first quartered using a chain saw. Next I removed a triangular section from each of the quartered sections. I carved a slight concavity into each of the quartered sections and then reassembled the log with 1" gaps between each section. I banded the log tight with a strapping machine and then replaced the straps with steel cable. The strapping machine allowed for tremendous compressive force and after replacing the straps with cable, I replaced the 1" spacers with wooden wedges that I could tap into place to achieve even greater tension in the cable. Having completed this piece, the continuum was also complete (see plates 6 and 7).

Plate 7. Four Passages
Installation View

Historical /Interpretive

I came to the School for American Craftsmen in order to learn technical proficiency and understand the properties of wood, metal and clay. My first attempts at making things focused on technical issues and developing a sense of structural integrity. Soon after, I began to develop a personal vision and broaden my vocabulary to include sculpture. Generating ideas was never difficult but defining them was. I wanted to understand what I would be making. Unfortunately, understanding my work prior to its completion was impossible. During the period of time I was developing my thesis work, both in the beginning thinking about it, and later while making it, I now believe much of the work was a struggle to present a part of myself. Not just a personal style of work but more akin to work about myself, my own experiences and thoughts. I see now more than ever before how personal the work was and how determined I was to make the work stand on its own. The success and /or failure of my efforts can only be recognized if I make known(mostly to myself) what these works represent and how I came to develop them.

The idea of passage became central to my work through the process of paring down a larger pool of ideas. My original sketches included many drawings of both gates and arches. I realized that gates and arches were forms representative of a physical type of passageway but, "passage" is a much more encompassing term. Passage extends beyond the physical. Passage refers to the personal journey I was experiencing, the process of manipulating wood from one thing into another and the cycles of both nature and time.

I came to Rochester Institute of Technology with a broad based liberal arts background. My undergraduate degree in sociology/psychology was a big part of my life for four years. I studied different cultures, ritual behavior and social interaction. At the same period of time I was fascinated by my art history classes, specifically architectural history and modern sculpture.

The work by several different people has been important in the development and understanding of my work. The architect Frank Lloyd Wright whose work is not only innovative and impressive wrote extensively about his own work and ideas. The sculptor

Naum Gabo was one of the leading artists in the constructivist movement and authored the Realistic Manifesto. The sociologist Erving Goffman brought Symbolic Interaction to an unprecedented level of academic notoriety as well as developed an entire vocabulary for analyzing social situations that is taught throughout the world. The work of Gabo and Wright as well as many other artists has influenced my sensitivity and awareness to the process of making art while the work of Goffman and other Symbolic Interactionists has given me the ability to gather and evaluate critical information from my own life and surroundings which becomes the content of my work.

Frank Lloyd Wright devoted his entire career to developing ideas useful in both constructing architecture and the environment that surrounds us. Wright's work extends beyond the physical and the genius of this man is still being realized today. In 1988, an exhibition entitled Frank Lloyd Wright In the Realm of Ideas was organized by the Scottsdale Arts Center Association and the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. The show contained quotes by Wright himself from both speeches and writings. I was lucky to view the show and was very moved by his work. It is impossible to site his many contributions to society but worthy to note those that strike a chord within me. Wright was particularly drawn to building on a site that others would find difficult.

> My prescription for a modern house: first, a good site. Pick one that has features making for character. . . . Then build your house so that you may still look from where you stood upon all that charmed you and lose nothing of what you saw before the house was built, but see more (Pfeiffer and Nordland 1988, 44).

Wright's mastery was never more exemplified than in the residence in Bear Run, PA. known as Fallingwater.

Wright was a true advocate of the machine age,

> The machine is a marvelous simplifier . . . and may be the modern emancipator of the human mind. . . . I wanted to realize genuine new forms true to the spirit of great tradition and found I should have to make them; not only make forms appropriate to the old (natural) and to the new (synthetic) materials, but I should have to so design them that the machine (or process) that must make them could and would make them better than anything could possibly be made by hand (Pfeiffer and Nordland, 3).

Not only was Wright understanding of the machine age but sympathetic to the individual quality of different materials, "Bring out the nature of the materials, let their nature intimately into your scheme. . . . Reveal the nature of the wood, plaster, brick or stone in

your designs; they are all by nature friendly and beautiful" (Pfeiffer and Nordland, 48). In all of Wright's ability as an innovator he was also a visionary,

> There is no such thing as creative except by the individual. Humanity, especially on a democratic basis, lives only by virtue of individuality. The whole endeavor, the whole effort of our education and our government, should be to discover first-- then cherish, use and protect the individual (Pfeiffer and Nordland, 89).

In 1920, at the age of thirty, Naum Gabo and his brother Antoine Pervsner presented the Realistic Manifesto and the invention of Constructivism as we know it today. Throughout his career Gabo presented himself as an artist and an enigmatic thinker, "By means of constructive techniques today we are able to bring to light forces hidden in nature and to realize psychic events. . . We do not turn away from nature, but, on the contrary, we penetrate her more profoundly than naturalistic art ever was able to do"(Read 1957, 7). Gabo was an advocate of industrial material and modern technology, but more importantly he believed, "Growth and Form are two inseparable concepts: there is no growth in nature that does not follow a principle of formation; no form that is not the result of a process of growth" (Read 1957, 8). Gabo states,

> "Abstract" is not the core of the constructive idea I profess. The idea means more to me. It involves the whole complex of human relation to life. It is a mode of thinking, acting, perceiving, and living. The constructive philosophy recognizes only one stream in our existence--life. Any thing or action which enhances life, propels it and adds to it something in the direction of growth, expansion, and development, is Constructive (Read 1957, 8).

My respect for these two men lies not only in their physical accomplishments but also in their intellectual endeavors. Both men have affected society and their work is testimony. The ability to affect society can be good or bad. In order to understand the relationship between social structure and the built (designed) environment I have employed techniques in sociology to help me organize a system of analysis. Symbolic Interactionists look at the behavior of everyday life believing that social conventions underlie daily activity. This form of sociology considers the human capacity to symbolize as well as define the notion of "self" and study linguistics. This type of sociology necessarily uses a microscope to identify the small bits and pieces that make up the larger whole. Robert Gutman (1972, 170) states, "The effective environment, the

totality of the significant variables influencing behavior, includes not only the physical environment but also the social structure and cultural attributes of the people who use it ". The designer, craftsman or artist is responsible in large part for shaping and coloring our three dimensional world. It is important to realize that we have the power to influence how people use and respond to the environment we have created. To quote the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, 5), "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning". It is this line of thinking I find most intriguing. I chose to pursue Sociology to help make sense of the world in which I live, I chose to make sculpture to express some of those findings.

In the original draft of this thesis I deferred any commentary on the meaning and development of my thesis work. That draft was submitted only several months after the work was completed and I don't think it was possible to understand the full impact of the work so soon after its completion. Now I see a tremendous amount of personal information in the work. I see the work as a snapshot of my life. I remember hearing in art history class the phrase "Picasso's blue period" I guess I see my thesis work as a period in my life.

The first sculpture I completed and wanted to be a part of my show was A Passage For Light. When I made that sculpture I had a dialogue in my mind that some great force was able to burn a hole through just the cone. I think now that it looks more like a microscope and perhaps it was the beginning of my own self study. Perhaps I was looking through a giant microscope and seeing the fragmented pieces on the ground as a metaphor for the process I was beginning. I remember tearing myself to pieces agonizing over what I was doing in graduate school, why I was even making sculpture. Perhaps the circle containing the fragmented sphere was a sign of strength, or perhaps the confines of an academic institution. Whatever the meaning or original intent I see something different now and that I like.

The second sculpture I completed was A Passage of the Burning. This piece still does not strike me as overly meaningful although a few thoughts come to mind. The concept I originally dealt with in this piece and The Passage for Light was that of

ambiguity. There is something both curious and delightful about a form that is simple yet thought provoking. This is admittedly risky business. There is a fine line between ambiguity and uncertainty. I was interested in creating rather straight forward forms with a bit of mystery. What I once believed was mystery I now believe was uncertainty. Perhaps the ball in A Passage of the Burning represented me. The impending movement symbolic of my plunge into the realm of sculpture, the burnt texture a metaphor for the difficulty, or hard knocks if you will, of the road ahead.

The group Four Passages was a pivotal point in the achievement of my thesis. It was during the time I was making the work that I realized how meaningful the word Passage was to all of my work and I became acutely aware of my own passage. I began to see that all of this work was coming from someplace I knew. I didn't really know where it was but it was familiar. I think this work exemplifies my struggle to deal with both technology and nature. It is probably my most direct confrontation with the constructivist within me. I now see the underlying meaning of the Passages that never occurred to me earlier. Perhaps the four passages were truly representative of my own life. The log was before I gained much knowledge in the way of craft, the quartered log was the middle technological ground but definitely sculptural. The 2x4 form the part of my life when I built houses and finally, the spiral, the technological influence.

An important aspect of my sculptures was the the process in which they were made. I not only enjoyed working on a large scale but found it made my task more challenging. Figuring out the mechanics of each operation or just moving such large objects gave me great satisfaction. Choosing materials was crucial to the success of Four Passages but how I processed them was the original concept of the sculpture.

I believe my work achieved a definite level of success although there are some things that could be improved. A Passage for Light and A Passage of the Burning are formally strong pieces. The play of balance in A Passage for Light works well to help draw the viewer into the piece. If anything could be changed I think the scale of the cone should be increased. A Passage of the Burning uses the impending motion of the ball to draw the viewer closer. This sculpture was never changed from its inception.

Four Passages is the sculpture that presents the most problems. Having only four

objects created big gaps in the conceptual flow among the pieces. Similarly, the presentation of the four passages in a single row negatively reinforced the gaps that existed. The first addendum to that sculpture would be the inclusion of a fifth passage which I omitted from this show due to time constraints. The fifth tube was conceived as a hollow tube ten feet long, three feet in diameter and constructed by coopering large boards. The presentation could have been improved if I was able to place one tube in each of the four corners of the gallery unfortunately, that too was not feasible. Although I am proud of the spiral as a technical accomplishment, the quartered and hollowed log was by far the most successful component of Four Passages. The quartered log is full of tension and explosiveness. Of the three manufactured components, the quartered log was the easiest to manufacture with the least amount of thinking and planning.

Marc Chagall stated, "If I create from the heart, nearly everything works; if from the head, almost nothing." It was not for some great length of time that I realized what bothered me most about my whole thesis endeavor. I have finally come to terms that my intentions to make sculpture although genuine were not exactly true. For a great period of time I thought about what I should do for my thesis. I approached the making of much of my work from an intellectual activity. I denied myself (not entirely) the pleasure of creativity that grew instinctively, passionately and emotionally. Although I can attribute my experience to the fact that the educational environment fosters such behavior, I am grateful for the road I have traveled.

In closing, I can not emphasize enough how important a period of separation has been on my ability to understand the work I made in my thesis. What I find most intriguing is that every once in awhile I gain even more insight into the work. I am constantly bringing new or different interpretations to the work I created almost three years ago. I hope I always continue to learn about myself through the art I create.

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